

### Review: Alexander Thurston, Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement

Loimeier, Roman

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Alexander Thurston (2017), *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, ISBN 978 0691172248, 333 pp.

Alexander Thurston's *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* supersedes everything that has been written so far on the development of this enigmatic jihadist movement in northeastern Nigeria. Based on years of research in Northern Nigeria as well as his knowledge of a vast number of primary sources in both Arabic and Hausa, Thurston is able to present a highly convincing account of the historical development of this jihadist movement. Organised in five chapters ("The Lifeworld of Muhammad Yusuf," "Preaching Exclusivism, Playing Politics," "Chaos Is Worse Than Killing," "Total War in Northeastern Nigeria," and "Same War, New Actors"), the book provides a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics that led to the emergence, rise, and fall of Boko Haram as an increasingly radical and militant religious movement in Northern Nigeria – or, more specifically, northeastern Nigeria – since the 1980s.

Religious and political violence has been an important and ever-present feature of everyday life in Northern Nigeria since the late 1970s – consider, for instance, the conflict between Northern Nigeria's Sufi movements and their opponents, the Yan Izala movement of reform, a series of violent clashes between ethnic groups in the North, the ongoing conflicts between Muslims and Christians, and, last but not least, the repeated rebellions of Muslim millenarian movements such as Maitatsine. Boko Haram has consequently been regarded by outside observers as a manifestation of a particularly savage version of Northern Nigerian protest, especially after both Nigerian and Western media started to portray Boko Haram as a Nigerian version of the Afghan "Taliban" in the early 2000s. Yet, such alarmist perspectives on Boko Haram completely missed the underlying emic dynamics that drove the development of Boko Haram as a distinct movement of protest, not only against Nigeria's existing political and economic set-up and its legacy of corruption and mismanagement, but also against Northern Nigeria's religious elites.

By the early 2000s, however, Northern Nigeria's religious elites were represented not only by the well-established Sufi orders but also by Northern Nigeria's Muslim reform movement, the Yan Izala and its "Salafi"-oriented offspring, the "Ahl al-Sunna" movement. Boko Haram's uncompromising stance against any kind of cooperation between Muslims and institutions that were identified as being inherently Western or corrupted by "the West" thus eventually even led to a break with Boko Haram's "spiritual fathers" in the Salafi movement, who advocated modern (Is-

lamic) education and who were willing to collaborate with Nigeria's institutions with respect to, for instance, the implementation of shariatic laws. In the early 2000s, Boko Haram thus emerged not only as the most radical Muslim movement of protest against the political and religious establishment, but also as the most principled movement of opposition against all forms of "*boko*," "Western culture" (including Western education and modern "Islamic" education), and even shariatic laws as applied by the "corrupt" political elites of the North.

Despite some efforts of local politicians in Maiduguri to "domesticate" Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram's leader, by accepting some of the political demands of the movement, in particular with respect to the "proper" implementation of shariatic laws and regulations, the movement was not willing to become yet another radical movement of opposition "bought" by the "system." When Muhammad Yusuf was eventually killed in a major riot in Borno State in 2009, the movement, under the new leadership of Abubakar Shekau, pursued its course of radical opposition with even greater ruthlessness. These dynamics of escalation led to a regional war in northeastern Nigeria (in the context of which Boko Haram has been able to gain territorial control over major parts of the northeast since 2011), a conflict that also spilled over into neighbouring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Only in 2016 was the Nigerian government, now under President Muhammad Buhari, in coalition with governments in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon and backed by military support from the United States, France, and Britain, able to defeat Boko Haram militarily. Despite this military success against Boko Haram (and its splinter groups), Nigeria has not managed to terminate the movement completely: some Boko Haram cells are still carrying out suicide attacks in northern Nigeria and in the Lake Chad region. Displaced populations, comprising more than two million people at the moment, have also not yet been able to return to their homes.

Although Thurston's account of these events turns a bit speculative in some minor instances – in particular, when the author discusses Boko Haram's activities in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon – his analysis is characterised in general by an extremely well-informed and lucid interpretation of the course of events and will thus remain, for quite some time, the most reliable (and readable) text on the development of the Boko Haram movement. A major advantage of Thurston's text is not only his convincing analysis of political developments, but also an excellent analysis of the "theological" debates around and within Boko Haram that have been mostly neglected in the past. The book ends with a number of recommendations by the author as to how the legacy of the Boko Haram

rebellion can be overcome – for instance, in terms of proper regional development (infrastructure, education, agriculture) in order to prevent the development of militant movements of the Boko Haram type in the future. Due to the fact that northeastern Nigeria has always been the most marginal (and neglected) region of the country, and as fundamental and structural changes in that respect are not within sight, the author's outlook is understandably bleak, in particular when we consider that the Nigerian government seems to be unable at the moment to retake proper administrative control over the devastated rural areas in the northeast. As such, Thurston's text is highly recommended as reading matter not only for political scientists and historians, but also for "orientalists." In sum, this text is a must for anybody interested in Nigeria's recent past as well as the dynamics of political and religious development in the larger West African region.

- Roman Loimeier